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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: NDI HOSTS USG-FUNDED WORKSHOP FOR
ELECTORAL REFORM COMMITTEE

REF: ABUJA 811

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter Pflaumer for reasons 1.4. (b
& d).

11. (U) SUMMARY: On May 5-6, the USAID-funded National Democratic Institute (NDI) hosted a workshop for officials and staff of the 22-member Electoral Reform Committee (ERC). The ERC was formed by President Yar'Adua in September 2007 to address both domestic and international concerns about Nigeria's flawed elections process, which have historically plagued the country, including his own April 2007 election. Focusing on four key best practices essential for a healthy democracy, NDI hopes to help the ERC strengthen its ability to conduct zonal hearings, solicit stakeholder input, and draft its final report to President Yar'Adua due September 2008 (though many observers expect that the Committee will request an extension). This workshop continues NDI's other USG-funded electoral reform assistance, which have involved other activities such as improving civil society election participation and capacity building for members of the Nigerian National Assembly -- all with the goal of creating an improved legislative framework for future elections. Opened by the Ambassador's goodwill message, the workshop received praise from both participants and the press. Zonal public hearings for stakeholder input have already begun, having been held in Lagos on May 14-16 and Abuja coming up on June 24-27. END SUMMARY.

12. (U) The May 5-6 workshop was entitled "Retreat on Electoral Systems and International Best Practices for Members of the Electoral Reform Committee," and was designed to expose the ERC to best practices in the areas of proportional representation, political party entree, political party representation in election administration, and methods of appointing electoral bodies. (Note: The ERC is a 22-member panel entrusted by President Yar'Adua to examine the flaws in Nigeria's electoral systems. End note.) Experts invited to help facilitate the program included Professor Anne Deysine of the University of Paris X-Nanterre, Professor Felix Uloa of NDI's program in Haiti, Charles Djrekpa from NDI's program in Cote D'Ivoire, and the University of Jos' Professor Etannibi Alemeka.

13. (U) The Ambassador opened the workshop with a goodwill message, reassuring workshop participants of the USG's support for Nigerian electoral reform efforts, but reminding them that real change has to be driven by Nigerians themselves in an open and inclusive system that involves all concerned parties, especially youth, women, and the disabled.

Now is the time for Nigeria to fix its broken electoral system, she said, and ensure that future elections are held in a credible and transparent manner. She concluded her remarks saying that should Nigeria accomplish serious and substantive reform of its electoral system, the world will take notice, and Nigeria's citizens will be the ultimate winners. Her comments were well-received and set the tone for rest of the workshop.

14. (C) Since the workshop, the Ambassador has met with ERC members Anglican Bishop of Kaduna Reverend Kukar (May 9) and Professor Grace Alele-Williams (May 16) (please protect both sources as ERC are to maintain their own counsel), to discuss the main issues the Committee is hearing on election reform. They both underscored that one of the biggest challenges that the ERC is facing and one which many of the stakeholders raise is how to truly make the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) "independent," because being appointed by Yar'Adua, the National Assembly, or even the judiciary will not necessarily make them independent. Reverend Kukar commented that on this issue, even if you adopt a U.S. Supreme Court model for INEC, where they would serve for life, there is no reasonable assurance that in Nigeria members would not be subject to influence. They both noted that the "independence" issue was one of the ERC's main stumbling blocks on what recommendations to make.

15. (C) Meanwhile May 21 press reports note that the inter-party committee President Yar'Adua set up to look at political party input into the electoral reform process believes that returning to the 1976 process of having an open

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ballot (where voters stand up behind their candidate) is the best course of action, as in their view it's cheaper (no ballot paper costs) and would avoid vote rigging. (Comment: It is, however, certainly not transparent and jeopardizes voters more as they would be subject to public scrutiny and threats based on which candidates they were influenced to stand behind. Certainly from a political party perspective this recommendation is self-serving. End comment.)
SANDERS